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Water tests OK in Libby

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No asbestos found in public water systems

HELENA - No asbestos was found in two public water systems located near the former W.R. Grace and Co.'s vermiculite mine in Libby, the state Department of Environment Quality said Friday.

These are the first test results released since the U.S. Environmental Protection Agency and the state Department of Environmental Quality began sampling the air, water and soil in Libby for asbestos contamination. More than 700 samples have been taken from areas such as residents' homes, city baseball fields and the road that leads to the mine.

The mine closed in 1990.

"We don't really expect to see it in the ground water, but you don't know if you don't check," said Greg Butts, a DEQ water specialist based in Kalispell.

Montana doesn't normally test water for asbestos so there are no records to compare Friday's finding to, Butts said.

The DEQ took five water samples on Dec. 28 from two public water systems, and all results showed no trace of asbestos fibers. EPA standards mandate that safe drinking water must contain no more than 7 million asbestos fibers per liter, Butts said.

One water quality test was done on a well at the Raintree Nursery, which is located across Montana Highway 37 from the Rainy Creek Road leading up to the mine. Grace once used this property, on the banks of the Kootenai River, as a screening and storage site for vermiculite ore ready for transportation.

Another sample was taken downstream at the River's Edge Mobile Home Park. The remaining three samples were taken from two wells and a spring near the Emkayan Village subdivision up river from the nursery.

The two water systems don't flow from the nearby Kootenai River, which follows Highway 37 through Libby, Butts said.

"We're really pleased with the results," said William Corcoran, Grace vice president of public and regulatory affairs, in a telephone interview from Maryland.

Paul Peronard, EPA on-scene coordinator, said he wasn't surprised the ground water was asbestos-free. Because asbestos isn't water-soluble, Peronard said, the soil would probably filter out asbestos fibers from any mine runoff by the time the water reached the public water systems.

The DEQ will retest the same sites this spring during high water to make sure heavy flows don't affect the results.

Corcoran said Grace is anxious for the labs to return the remaining test results.

"The most important thing is we're finally getting data and that's what is missing from this discussion," he said.

The EPA began running tests after it was alleged in November that 192 miners and their families have died from asbestos-related diseases and 375 more Libby residents have been diagnosed, including some with no apparent link to the vermiculite mine.

Although Montana doesn't sample ground water for asbestos contamination, Butts said Libby city water operators did test the public water supply in 1993 and found no asbestos. Butts said many older water systems, including Libby's, used pipes made from asbestos. The DEQ will run new tests on the city water system Wednesday; the results won't be available for two weeks.

The source for city water is Flower Creek, which is located across the Kootenai Valley and in a separate mountain range from the former vermiculite mine site, Butts said, adding he expects the city water to have no asbestos contamination.

The remaining test results are expected to come back in chunks, starting with the release of air samples in two weeks, Peronard said.

All air samples taken in Libby residents' homes and at the two vermiculite processing facilities located near town will be released first. The next tests released will be those taken of the vermiculite insulation found in residents' homes.

Soil samples ranging from dirt to piles of vermiculite will be released last because they are the most difficult to analyze, Peronard said.

Peronard is also considering using air quality samples taken by the DEQ over the last year to see if asbestos fibers exist. He is undecided about using the filters, which the DEQ is storing in a refrigerated archive, because they may have too many flaws.

Usually, when testing for asbestos fibers, air quality samplers use smaller filters than those used by the DEQ to monitor Libby's air, which has had consistent quality problems because of inversions, weather patterns and wood burning, Peronard said.

Another problem is the filters may contain too much dirt for technicians to accurately count the asbestos content, he said.